

WICKED VENICE.

To the average mind the history of Venice is a bloody and lurid melodrama. Dungeons under the canals, cells exposed to the fury of an almost torrid sun, hidden doors ever menacing an egress of spies and assassins, virtue and valor ever succumbing to dagger or to poison; and all these under the ægis of a Government proclaiming itself Christian and popular.

Such is the picture arising before him who reads the current tales of Venice, or who gazes on a stage representation of Venetian story. Until the nineteenth century had dawned, this idea of Venice was mainly one of English and Protestant creation. Heretical hatred and commercial rivalry had combined to foster prejudice against that Catholic republic, which had been for centuries the wealthiest among the great states of Europe. But with our century came the necessity, on the part of France, of justifying a great national crime. Fair Venice lay a corpse at the feet of the French revolutionary tiger, and it was but natural that her murderers should insist that she had merited her fate. Behold, then, French writers of serious calibre heaping obloquy on the memory of the Queen of the Adriatic! Of course German authors swelled the chorus, for a German power had profited by the crime

of France; and a trade in peoples had to be justified, if nothing else would do it, by the supposed vileness of the bartered. Nearly universal, therefore, has been the cry against Venetian cruelty, dishonesty, tyranny, and malignant cunning.

One of the most noted illustrations of the mysteries of Venice is the drama of "Angelo," by M. Victor Hugo. The poet had used the poison and daggers of the Ten, the secret passages, loathsome dungeons, etc., to the utmost; and certain critics ventured to challenge the probability of his *mise en scène*. In one of the notes of his published drama, Hugo appealed to the authority of Count Daru, the historian of the First Empire, and to the "Statutes of the State Inquisition"* of Venice, furnished by that

* The "Inquisizione di Stato" of Venice must not be confounded with either the Roman (Holy Office) or the Spanish Inquisition. The Roman was an ecclesiastical tribunal, the Spanish a royal one; but both took cognizance of heresies and similar crimes. The Venetian tribunal, made permanent in 1454, was purely political, and was composed of three persons—two chosen from the Ten, and one from the council of the doge. Its jurisdiction was universal, not even the doge being excepted. Originally it was called the "Inquisizione dei Dieci," but in 1610 the style was changed to that of "Inquisizione di Stato." Its power was unlimited in all affairs of state and of police. It disposed of the treasury, gave instruction to ambassadors, etc., and on occasion deposed the doge. When, however, it undertook to judge the Doge Marino Faliero, it called a *giunta* of twenty nobles, which body remained permanent until 1582.

writer. We give a synopsis of these statutes, which, according to Daru, bear the date of June 12, 1454:

In the sixteenth it is decreed that when the tribunal deems it necessary to put any one to death, the execution must not be public; the condemned must, if possible, be drowned in the Canal of the Orphans (*Canal Orfano*). The twenty-eighth establishes that if any Venetian noble reveals that he has been corruptly approached by a foreign ambassador, he shall be authorized to enter into the proposed relations; when the affair has culminated, the intermediary agent is to be drowned, providing, however, that he be not the ambassador himself or some person generally known. The fortieth provides for the institution of spies, not only in the capital, but in all the principal cities of the republic. These agents will report in person to the tribunal, twice a year, as to the conduct of the officers in their respective districts. In a supplement to the statutes, provision is made to the effect that any one who so talks as to promise public disturbance, shall be warned; if he continues the practice, he may be drowned. The twenty-eighth provision is for ridding the state of any prisoner whom it may be impolitic to punish openly. A jailer is to feign to sympathize with him, and, having previously administered to him a slow and untraceable poison, he must allow the victim to escape.

Daru tells us that he found these statutes, hitherto unknown,* in the Royal Library of Paris. They were bound in a quarto volume, together with another work which bore the title, "Opinion of Father Paul, Servite, Councillor of State, as to the best manner of governing the Venetian Republic, both as to internal and external affairs, that it may enjoy perpetual prosperity." The Servite priest was no other than Paul Sarpi, the celebrated adversary of the Holy See whenever its temporal claims came into collision with the pretensions of Venice; and Daru, who was naturally of the opinion that Sarpi was to be revered as an authority, gladly embraced the idea that the juxtaposition of the statutes, in one volume, with the advice on Venetian government, was a proof that the Servite had also published the statutes.

We would be willing to accept the authority of Sarpi in this matter, but we are forced to yield to the arguments which show that he was the author of neither one of the works enclosed in Daru's treasure-trove.† But, granting the value of Sarpi in the premises, there are several good reasons for rejecting these statutes as unauthentic. In the first place, how is it that no investigator has ever found

* "I know of no writer," says Daru, "even among the Venetians, who has spoken of these statutes." See "*Histoire de la République de Venise*," edit. 1821, vol. vi, p. 385.

† See an excellent article in the *British Review* for October, 1877, p. 337. The falsity of these statutes, and of many of Daru's assertions concerning Venice, was perfectly demonstrated by Count Tiepolo in his "*Discorsi sulla Storia Veneta*," Udine, 1828.

any allusion to these provisions in any document of an age anterior to Daru's manuscript? According to the very constitution of the Venetian Government, such measures could not have been decreed without the sanction of the Great Council, and after having passed through all the formalities of registration in the archives of the Ten. And no search has yet discovered them.

Again, the alleged statutes are full of errors such as no Venetian jurisconsult of the fifteenth century could have committed. Thus, at that period all the judicial and official documents of the republic were drawn up in Latin, whereas these alleged statutes are couched in the Venetian dialect, which did not come into vogue until a century afterward. Again, these decrees are pronounced in the name of the "State Inquisitors," a title not given to these magistrates before 1610. Finally, in these ordinances the Inquisitors assert jurisdiction over the prisoners in the *Piombi*, whereas these apartments were not used as prisons until 1594. These statutes, therefore, are apocryphal; and, so far as they are the foundation of the accusations against Venice, we must banish from our minds all the pictures which have been designed to represent the Venetian legislature as a congregation of demons, rather than an assembly of grave and reverend lords.

How do the calumniators of Venice wish us to account for the internal peace which reigned in

the republic for so many centuries? We find no rebellions either at home or in the colonies; and this in spite of frequent famines, plagues, wars, and excommunications. Had such a cancer as the foes of Venice suppose existed, and in the very heart of the nation, devouring by degrees every vestige of liberty and destroying all sense of security, would the republic have remained so uniformly contented and prosperous? It was in 1468, fifteen years after the supposed statutes had been put in force, that the illustrious Cardinal Bessarion, Patriarch of Constantinople, when presenting his valuable library to the republic, thus expressed himself: "What country offers one so sure a refuge as yours, governed by equity, integrity, and wisdom? Here virtue, moderation, gravity, justice and good faith have fixed their abode. Here power, even though great and extensive, is as just as gentle. Here the wise govern, the good command the perverse, and particular interests are ever sacrificed to the general welfare."

Such reflections as these caused Valery (one of the most noted of French travellers, and better acquainted with Italy than most foreigners are) to write in 1838: "I have abandoned my prejudices concerning the Venetian Inquisitors, and I did so with great satisfaction; for it is refreshing to find at least fewer oppressors in history. It is to be regretted that an enlightened historian like Daru should have believed in the pretended statutes of

the 'State Inquisition,' which he found in manuscript in the Royal Library, and which are regarded by all educated Venetians as apocryphal and as fabricated by an ignorant enemy of the republic. The State Inquisitors were guardians of the laws, and silent tribunes dear to the people. The Inquisitors defended the people against the excesses of aristocratic power." *

It has been remarked that modern Venetians seem to have no fear of any thorough investigations into the early history of their country. They rather court it, as is evidenced by the zeal with which they began, immediately after the close of the Austrian domination, to publish the most important treasures of their hitherto impenetrable archives. Among these is a collection of documents referring to the history of the palace of the doge. It contains the minutes of the sittings of the Council of Ten from 1254 to 1600; and we can not find in it the least trace of, for instance, the drownings said to have been decreed in the alleged statutes. As well look for indication of some burning at the stake in Venice—in that country which, alone among all European lands, never witnessed that horror. As to the name of the *Canal Orfano*, in which so many victims of a wicked statecraft are said to have been remorselessly drowned, that designation is not necessarily derived from the fact of so many

* "Voyage en Italie," vol. i, p. 314.

orphans having been made in it by order of the Inquisitors; for modern Venetians believe that this canal was so called centuries before the State Inquisition came into existence.

Much has been said about the convenient opportunity afforded to malignity by the provision of a receptacle for anonymous denunciations to the Inquisitors. Certainly there was no more connection between this "Lion's Mouth" and tyranny, than there is between tyranny and the P. O. boxes hanging from our lamp-posts. And as to the anonymous letters addressed to the Inquisitors, a law of 1387 decreed that they should be immediately burned. And when, toward the end of the sixteenth century, such demonstrations were sometimes admitted, no proceedings could be taken against the accused without a vote of four-fifths of the Council. And it is to be noted that the precautions taken against false testimony and false accusations were greater in Venice than in any other land.

It has been said that the main reservoir was so situated in the precincts of the ducal palace that the authorities could at once quell a rebellion by shutting off the supply of water. But besides the two magnificent reservoirs in the palace court, there were many others in other places, and nearly every private house had its own well or cistern. Documents as old as 1303 speak of a board of magistrates similar to our aqueduct commissioners, whose first duty was to see that every new house was supplied with a well.

And now a word on the *Piombi*, those cells of alleged torture in the uppermost story of the ducal palace, immediately under the leaden roof. It will be interesting to quote the testimony of Daniel Manin, the patriotic dictator during the Venetian revolution of 1848, concerning these supposed inventions of human malignity. A Parisian critic having occasion to review a work which bemoaned the "mysteries of Venice," and dilated pitifully on the "Bridge of Sighs," on the "horrible *Piombi*," etc., he showed his article to the patriot. Having read it, Manin thus addressed him: "Can it be possible that you, an educated and serious man, believe these nonsensical yarns? Do you still credit the tales of your nursery days? I know these *Piombi* and these *Pozzi*; I have been confined therein, and I can assure you that they are by no means uncomfortable lodgings. Believe me when I say that all this talk about the cruelties of Venice is an old wife's tale."

Then Manin showed his astonished friend how the Most Serene Republic could not have survived so gloriously for so many centuries had its government not been indulgent and popular.* In fact, to this day the Venetians preserve an affectionate remembrance of that government; and hence it was that they so gladly proclaimed and sustained their republic of 1848, whereas elsewhere the Italian movement was merely the work of a revolutionary

* J. Morey, in the "Illustrations et Célébrités du XIXe Siècle," vol. v. Paris, 1884.

faction. These *Piombi* could not have been glaciers in winter and furnaces in summer, when Howard, the great English prison reformer, avowed their healthfulness.* Again, it is not true that they were located immediately under the roof of the palace. Ruskin carefully measured the space between the prison cells and the roof, and he found it was in some places nine metres high, and in others never less than five.†

Twelve years before the fall of the Venetian Republic the celebrated astronomer Lalande said of the State Inquisitors: "They are distinguished more for their wisdom than for talent. They are chosen from among men whose age guarantees freedom from passion and from the dangers of prejudice or of corruption. Rarely indeed is there any abuse of the absolute powers confided to them."‡ The reader will remember that this praise comes from a "philosopher." The eminent historian Botta says: "Venice was without serious trouble for many centuries. She was the object of attack for the most powerful nations—the Turks, the Germans, and the French. She was in the road of barbarous conquerors, and in the midst of revolutions of the

* "State of the prisons in England and Wales, with preliminary observations and an account of some foreign prisons." London, 1777.

† "Stones of Venice," vol. ii, p. 293; note. London, 1852.

‡ "Voyage en Italie, Contenant l'Histoire et les Anecdotes les plus Singulières de l'Italie." Paris, 1786.

peoples. Yet she came safe and sound from every political tempest; and such was the perfection of her ancient laws, so deep had struck the roots given them by time, that she never needed to change their character. It is my firm conviction that there has never existed a wiser government than that of Venice, whether we consider its own preservation or the happiness of its subjects. For this reason Venice never had any dangerous factions in her bosom, and for the same reason she never entertained any fear of new ideas. . . . I do not know whether pity or indignation should be felt for those who declaim so fiercely against the Inquisition of Venice, and who affect to regard the existence of that tribunal as a justification for the death inflicted on the ancient and sacred republic.” *

The chief reason for the hostility displayed by so many moderns toward the memory of the Venetian Republic is the fact that it was pre-eminently “clerical,” as it is the “liberal” fashion nowadays to style everything not positively hostile to the Catholic Church. According to the clamorous philosophists of the liberal school, “clericalism” is a scoffing at reason, a denial of the sun’s light, a cursing of liberty, an exaltation of despotism, a subordination of all civil power to a theocracy, an ignoring of all the conquests of modern science, a trampling on human dignity; in fine—and this sums up all the iniquities of “clericalism”—it is a return to the Cimmerian

* “*Storia d’Italia da 1789 a 1814.*” Florence, 1816.

darkness of the Middle Age. Melancholy indeed to a radical is the spectacle furnished by a capital city panting under the incubus of two hundred churches, thirty religious establishments for men, thirty-five nunneries, and confraternities innumerable. And, sadder still to relate, every one of these monuments of Venetian religious devotion owed its origin to some vow in recognition of a favor obtained from God.

Well did the republic merit the title of Very Christian, given to it by Pope Honorius in the seventh century, the third of its existence. Thirty-nine times in the year the capital beheld the doge and senate proceeding in full state, *gran gala*, to some church,* in accordance with some vow made on an occasion of peril to the state. Foreign observers were always edified by the piety manifested in the accomplishment of this duty. Commynes wrote in 1494: "Venice is the most glorious city I have ever seen, and it is the most wisely governed. The worship of God is conducted here more worthily than elsewhere; and although the Venetians may have their faults, I believe that God helps them on account of their reverence for the Church."†

And when the republic was twelve centuries old, this spirit was as strong as when the dubious pros-

* The ceremonies of Holy Week were especially splendid. Saint-Didier, in his "La Ville et République de Venise," written in 1679, says of the illuminations in Venice on Good Friday night that then the city was wont to consume more white wax than was used in all the rest of Italy in a year.

† "Mémoires," b. vii, ch. 8, at year 1494.

perity of its infancy drew it to the altars of God. Albrizzi wrote in 1771: "The most noteworthy characteristic of this august republic is its firm and inviolable attachment to the Catholic Church. The commanders of her armies, the governors of her fortresses, in their wars with the Turks, have defended the faith with their blood, and often amid most cruel tortures. In most critical times this wise government has paid the greatest attention to a preservation of the faith of Jesus Christ in its purity. . . . The same zeal is shown to-day. . . . The most conspicuous monuments of Venice prove the piety of its government at every period of its existence. The souvenir of the many victories of Venice is renewed every year by some religious ceremony, performed with as much majesty as appropriateness. The doge, at the head of the senate, fulfills this pious duty. . . . Hence we may say that the Venetians are very assiduous in the practice of their religious duties; for on every feast-day, and especially on the festivals of the Holy Virgin, their protectress,* the churches are filled with people of every class and condition, all wrapped in recollection."†

Like other countries, Venice passed through many struggles with the Holy See, but these were never concerning matters of faith. Even during

* The Feast of the Annunciation is the anniversary of the birth of the capital city. Hence on the pavement of the Church of Santa Maria della Santà we read: "*Unde origo, inde salus.*"

† Il Forestiere Illuminato della Città di Venezia." Venice, 1771.

her terrible alienation from Rome in the pontificate of Paul V., the interdict launched by that Pontiff did not throw her, as the Reformers predicted, into the ranks of Protestantism. How could such a defection have been possible, demands Cantù, "when Venice was thoroughly Catholic? Her origin, her patrons, her national festivals, the fine arts, all proclaimed her such. . . . And," he continues, "let any person of judgment tell us whether that religion was likely to perish which was just then erecting so many sumptuous churches. When the public spirit was so identified with Catholicism, could an eminently conservative government have dreamed of so radical a revolution? We have studied many documents concerning the interdict of Venice, and while we have found much boldness and much discontent, we have always discerned Christian submission and a desire for reconciliation."*

But this Christian spirit is displeasing to the liberals of our day, and hence they have re-echoed the accusations made against Venice by Bonaparte, the chief author of that great crime by which the ancient republic was obliterated from the list of nationalities. Let the reader judge whether these charges were true; whether among all governments, that one in which equality before the law most flourished, that one which was the most patriotic in all Christendom, and that one which lived the longest, was precisely the one which all good people should the most detest.

* "Gli Eretici d'Italia," vol. iii, p. 188. Turin, 1866.